Recognition & Empathy: The portrayal of the British-Indian community in English language fiction, and library selection & promotion of such fiction

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ABSTRACT

Background: The genre of literature that covers the British-Indian experience has resulted in both the emergence of popular award-winning novels and an unhappy backlash from the communities portrayed in those novels who feel they have been misrepresented. Little research has been done to establish how deep this sentiment runs in the British-Indian community and how libraries have responded to this feeling in their stock selection and promotion.

Aims: This study aimed to find out exactly how the British-Indian community regarded this genre, the use of fiction as a tool for cultural awareness and empathy, and if librarians view themselves as facilitators for this empathy in their policies towards the genre.

Methods: Questionnaires were sent to both the community and to 250 public libraries. Response rates were low for both, with only 4% of libraries participating. Follow-up interviews and e-mail questions were undertaken.

Results: Responses revealed both a deep unhappiness with the genre from the community and a vast gulf between the interpretations of librarians of the texts in question and those from the British-Indian community. Librarians had high ideals about community bridge-building and the use of fiction to facilitate that endeavour but had little practical suggestions on how to implement this.

Conclusions: The study showed that not only did the British-Indian community feel their portrayal in fiction was unfair, but that librarians were unaware of this sentiment and thus it did not effect their stock selection and promotion. Librarians were shown to have missed many opportunities for social inclusion that had arisen due to the community's unhappiness with some texts. Suggestions were made on how libraries could change their organisational culture so that they engaged more with the community, had more awareness of the genre in general and developed empathic skills valuable to the role of the librarian.

"We were born to unite with our fellow men,
and to join in community with the human race."

-   CICERO

1. Introduction

1.1 Aims

To investigate whether the portrayal of the British Indian community in British-Indian fiction is a fair representation, the use of such fiction as a tool for creating empathy, and whether a fair representation is important to library staff when selecting fiction from this genre.

1.2 Objectives

1) *To discover whether people from the British-Indian community (defined for the purpose of this project as British people who ethnically originate from the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) feel English language fiction about their community is a fair representation of their culture and experiences.*

Making up 4% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2003) and having a fifty-year presence in the UK, the British-Indian community has managed to have a slight, yet significant influence in many areas: food, music, television, and literature. This last medium has seen the emergence of popular authors such as Monica Ali - author of 'Brick Lane' which depicts the story of a young Bangladeshi woman who moves to Tower Hamlets to marry a much older man - and Zadie Smith - author of 'White Teeth,' also featuring a Bangladeshi family as main characters – amongst others.

This development, however, has not always been met with enthusiasm. Monica Ali, herself of Bangladeshi origin, raised the ire of the Bangladeshi community in Britain (and East London in particular) due to the perception that her novel portrayed the British-Bangladeshi community in a wholly negative light. The sentiment was so strong that some members of the community organised a march in protest (BBC News, 2006).

In lieu of such incidents, the initial objective of this research project is to ascertain whether or not the portrayal of the British-Indian community in this genre of literature is in actual harmony with how people from that community see themselves to be. This is important because fiction does play an important role in creating empathy for other cultures (Barter, 1996) and if that tool is misused, then it denies that culture *recognition* – a fundamental respect for its identity (Taylor, 1992).

A 'fair representation' in the context of this project refers to a portrayal that lends the reader insights and understanding of a culture – both its strengths and weaknesses – without resorting to stereotypes, sensationalism and a demeaning image.

This study aims to discover **what** the community thinks of such literature, **how** they feel they are being represented, and **why** they believe they are being represented in the way that they are. It is hoped that there will be examples of both positive and negative portrayals.

The 'community' targeted here will be 2nd and 3rd generation people from either an Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi background. They have been chosen because they are – from this researcher's personal experience – likely to identify themselves as British-Indian, British-Bangladeshi, British-Asian etc, are likely to be fluent in English, and may be familiar with this branch of literature.

The terms 'British-Indian,' 'South-Asian,' 'Asian,' and 'British-Asian,' will be, for the purpose of this project, used interchangeably because:

a)   People from the community, in response to the questionnaires used in this study, described themselves with one or more such descriptions and:

b)   If there is doubt as to whether the person described is British, then the term South-Asian will be applied.

British-Indian fiction, for the purpose of this project, is confined solely to English language fiction with characters and plots about British-Indian people living in the UK.

2) *To discover whether or not library professionals consider a fair representation as a factor when they choose to stock and promote such fiction.*

This study will then tie in the findings from the above objective into a discussion of how library professionals view such fiction. In 1999, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport declared in a document entitled 'Libraries for All' that libraries were one of the best places through which social exclusion could be combated (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). Whilst this project is not aimed primarily at the issue of social inclusion, there are places where the topics overlap.

For example, if libraries are choosing British-Indian fiction that merely repeats and regurgitates stereotypes common in the public consciousness they would, in effect, be reinforcing those stereotypes, especially if they do not stock literature that provides a healthy counter-balance. Such negative reinforcement may then contribute to friction between communities, and hamper efforts in multiculturalism and integration. Those that perpetuate such images – such as libraries - then play a part in the oppression of minorities (Taylor, 1992) instead of their inclusion.

Library authorities will be contacted to ascertain the following:

      a)   The factors that influence the stock selection of British-Indian fiction.

      b)   Whether libraries are aware that such fiction may have both negative and positive portrayals of the communities they describe and whether this is an issue when they select stock.

3) *To discover whether libraries should play a role in fair portrayals of the British-Indian community.*

This objective directly follows on from the one above. Whilst the above looks at how and why libraries select British-Indian fiction, this will look at the libraries' responsibilities in their stock selection. This will compare between official policy each individual authority has and actual practice. As such, library authorities will be asked:

      a)   If they have any sort of internal policy which affects stock selection for ethnic minority fiction in English, and what they do when they encounter 'sensitive' texts.

      b)   Whether or not they feel that libraries are aware of fiction as a tool for empathy and whether librarians should then have a role in promoting fair representations of minority communities in the UK.

It is hoped that this project will be able to generate enough data through which positive recommendations can be made to, specifically, library professionals and, indirectly to publishers and the British-Indian community in general.

2. Methodology

The methodological basis for this study will be mainly an inductive one with a qualitative approach. The latter is a logical approach as this study will be dealing primarily with people's opinions and beliefs (Silverman, 2000), whilst the former again is necessary as there is no initial hypothesis to test (Gorman & Clayton, 1997). At times during the analysis of the results, a deductive approach was utilised as certain assumptions came to light which were then necessarily tested as such an approach dictates (ibid.). Nonetheless, this still falls under the qualitative rubric where research is "interpretive, tending to begin with evidence and then building theory" (Gorman & Clayton, 1997: 29).

Using the multiple approach method of triangulation, the study utilised a mixture of questionnaires and interviews to collate the data. Triangulation enhances research as it helps the researcher to tackle the initial research question from multiple aspects and viewpoints (Gorman & Clayton, 1997), and by using different methods the researcher is able counteract any weaknesses apparent in any one given method (ibid.).

The two groups targeted were library staff and members of the British-Indian community. Two separate questionnaires were thus necessary: the community questionnaire was tailored to discover primarily the respondents' attitudes towards the Indo-English genre, whilst the librarian questionnaire was tailored to discover primarily attitudes surrounding the provision and promotion of this genre. Each questionnaire was in the form of a Word document distributed via e-mail. Both are available as an appendix to this study.

The research value of questionnaires lies in the fact that participants can complete them at their own leisure and therefore have much more time to think about their answers to formulate a comprehensive response. This, in theory, leads to the generation of higher quality data (Schensun et al, 1999). The anonymity of the process can also contribute to participants giving more honest responses.

Interviews will help to explore questionnaire answers in-depth. Initially, it was hoped that interviews would be chosen at the participants' discretion from the choice of face-to-face, or, for ease of convenience, via e-mail or telephone.

Interviewees were to be chosen based on both the quality of answers to the questionnaire (with the aim of interviewing those with higher quality and more thoughtful responses) and their willingness to be interviewed. Interview questions were formulated in response to the nature of the answers received in the questionnaire.

The value of interviews is due to the fact that they allow people to speak freely on a topic and allow for probing and exploring by the interviewer. Moreover, they not only canvass experiences and opinions but also emotions as well (ibid.), something relevant to this study because if it was found that people thought their portrayal in fiction was unfair, this could lead to hurt feelings and disillusionment.

2.1 Questionnaire Design

It was decided that for both questionnaires an open question form would be used. An open question is where a query asks for the respondents thoughts and opinions as opposed to a closed question where there is a specific answer and the question is usually framed in a multiple choice format. An open question form better facilitates the qualitative nature of this project by drawing on in-depth comments and as a lead in to a follow-up interview (Bell, 1993).

One potential drawback in using this method is that it is time consuming to summarise the results (Santos et al, 1999). A way around this is to simply look for general themes that come across in all the responses and summarise those instead of each individual form.

Another drawback is that the format can be off-putting to potential respondents as it superficially seems like it will take a lot of time and thought. In order to allay this fear, the questionnaire was redesigned to have a mixture of closed and open

questions. The initial question on the community form was a closed one, which helps to ease the respondent into the questionnaire. For the librarians form, the questions were broken up into two sections: open questions to begin with and then a mixture of both methods in the final five questions. This involved a statement that librarians were asked to agree or disagree with (thus fulfilling the closed question aspect) and then invited to comment on.

Bell (1993) mentions a number of ways bias can enter into questionnaires. One is through leading questions and the other through presuming questions. Leading questions are framed to receive only one possible answer from the respondent. Presuming questions reflect the researcher's personal views without the realisation that other people may not share those views.

With the community questionnaire, care was taken not to lead the respondents to answer in one particular way: for example, instead of only asking whether the respondents felt British-Indian fiction affected them negatively, they were invited to offer both the positive and negative experiences that they had had with the genre.

With the librarian questionnaires, as mentioned above, the final five questions involved inviting respondent comments on a series of statements. This avoided any potential leading and presumptions.

Questions were limited to ten for both forms so as not to overwhelm the participant. A proviso was added that there may be follow-up questions via e-mail in order to clarify or expand upon the answers already given.

Both questionnaires were submitted in draft form to the supervisor of this project. Minor changes were made, specifically in regards to the wording of some questions, but no major issues were identified.

2.2 Distribution

2.2.1 Librarian Questionnaire

250 public libraries were targeted to receive the librarian questionnaire. A large sample was chosen in order to counteract a low response rate, an issue that had been a factor in previous research projects with a similar theme (Mansoor, 2006). The 250 libraries were chosen mostly at random, though the following factors were taken into consideration:

- The sample was spread throughout the entirety of the UK.

- All major cities were targeted.

- The form was sent to the central library of a locality and a number of branch libraries.

- A number of areas were specifically chosen because their population was known to have a high percentage of South-Asians.

- Where available, the questionnaire was also sent to the Stock Manager and Multicultural Librarian of that particular authority.

Individuals and organisations that had in the past been involved with the issues of social inclusion in libraries were identified, contacted via e-mail and invited to either participate or to pass the questionnaire on to anyone whom they believed would be interested. The form was also distributed on the lis-pub-libs e-mail list, which is an online e-mail group dedicated to public libraries and has a membership, at time of writing, of 1,116 subscribers. Furthermore, it was forwarded onto the e-mail list of the Network (www.seapn.org.uk), an organisation dedicated to the issue of social exclusion in libraries, museums and other related fields. Exact membership figures for this list were unavailable.

The public libraries were all contacted twice via e-mail. The first instance was in order to distribute the questionnaire, whilst the second, after a fortnight was a polite reminder stating how easy and quick it was to complete the form, the value of the research and also giving them a deadline by which completed forms should be returned. This is a recommended procedure by Bell (1993) to help facilitate a higher response rate in good time so that the results could be analysed in depth.

2.2.2 Community Questionnaire

The community questionnaire was sent via e-mail to personal contacts within the British-Indian community who were then asked to forward the form onto anyone else they knew in the community, thereby creating a 'snowball' effect. The form was also posted on online forums and message boards targeted at the British-Indian community. The exact number of subscribers to these forums was unavailable. It was further distributed via e-mail to South-Asian community centres, organisations and faith-based groups (such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu organisations whom all have a large, though not exclusive, British-Indian background) around the UK.

As with the librarian questionnaire, individuals and organisations with a prior interest in the study of British-Indian fiction were identified, contacted via e-mail and invited to either participate or to pass the questionnaire on to anyone whom they believed would be interested.

2.3 Selection of Interview Subjects

Only two respondents, both from the library profession, made themselves available for a face-to-face interview. A third librarian was contacted for the possibility of an interview and, though this respondent did not complete a questionnaire, this was undertaken via e-mail. Of the two initial respondents, only one was chosen for a face-to-face interview. Given the distance involved in travelling to the other respondent and the fact that an interview over the telephone would prove to be very costly, no further correspondence was undertaken, simply because the quality of the answers this respondent had given in their questionnaire was low and

thus did not warrant further elaboration or clarification. 'Low quality' here refers to short answers with a general lack of depth.

2.4 Interview Techniques

Bell (1993) describes two methods of interviewing: a structured approach and an unstructured approach. A structured approach involves asking a series of predetermined questions, whilst an unstructured approach involves a discussion centred around a specific topic. The former allows for all topics to be covered and is easier to analyse, whilst the latter can, if used wisely and is controlled, can produce a large amount of relevant data.

Given that there were only two interviews undertaken for this project – one via e-mail and one face-to-face – it was decided that the e-mail interview, by its very nature, was better suited to a structured approach, and the face-to-face interview would be a combination of primarily structured and also unstructured methods. The face-to-face interview thus involved a series of topics that needed to be covered, but also involved a conversation centred around each of these topics.

The face-to-face interview was arranged at a time and place convenient to the interviewee. Answers were recorded via shorthand.

2.5 Ethnicity of the Researcher

Gorman & Clayton (1997) state that one of the criticisms of the qualitative approach is that it is open to bias, especially if the researcher holds strong opinions that he then tries to justify through his study. The present researcher for this project is a British-Bangladeshi Muslim who has read some of the novels mentioned by the community respondents. In order to maintain neutrality, the researcher has refrained from giving his own interpretations of those novels and has refrained from stating whether or not he agrees with the interpretations presented by the respondents. Instead, the discussion will be steered solely by the interpretations given in the respective questionnaires. The researcher is personally aware of the sentiments of the

Muslim community regarding their portrayal in the media, but again has refrained from presenting his own views and has drawn instead on the views of other Muslims and of news reports regarding studies into this area.

3. Ethical Considerations

Gorman & Clayton (1997) identify a number of ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent is where the participant understands the process that he is being asked to take part in and knows that confidentiality will be assured. In the context of this study, all participants were given via e-mail an information sheet providing a comprehensive outline of what would be involved. They had the choice not to participate or to withdraw at any time after initial participation. They were assured that no one but the supervisor and the researcher had access to the information they provided. Participants had access to their specific information at any time, and it was made known to them that all information mentioned in the project would be completely anonymous and confidential.

For the purpose of this study both library and community respondents were assigned an alphanumeric identifier. For example, the first library respondent has the identifier '**Lib 1**' whilst the first community respondent had the identifier '**Comm 1**.' This is to make sure that the respondents are not easily identifiable, thus preserving confidentiality and anonymity (ibid.).

4. Literature Review

4.1 Empathy and Fiction

Much of the discussion in the literature focuses on overcoming children's wariness towards other groups through the medium of fiction. Though the context is certainly different, the basic principle is still relevant. This is reinforced by research in the field of psychology, in particular one study that argued that, contrary to the popular perception about 'bookworms,' people who read large amounts of fiction are not only able to empathise better with others, but have better social skills than people who do not (Mar et al, 2006). The study encourages further research into the issue with the optimistic conclusion that "…stories could provide a powerful tool for educating both children and adults about understanding others, an important skill currently under-stressed in most educational settings" (Mar et al, 2006: 708).

Elkin & Triggs (1985) had already recognised this almost a decade earlier in their introduction to a work about children's books for a multicultural society. They believed that "fiction provides the most powerful route into empathy" (Elkin & Triggs 1985:5) especially that from a different culture which "can banish ignorance and pave the way to understanding" (ibid.).

Such a strong sentiment only reinforces the fact that fiction about a different culture needs to have a fair portrayal. If fiction is as powerful as the previous studies indicate, then an unfair representation in novels could have an equally strong negative repercussion in readers as a fair one could for creating empathy.

More recent studies have coined the term 'extended contact' for the theory that people exposed to positive representations of other, different groups will develop empathy and understanding for those people. Fiction is one tool for this and Cameron & Rutland (2006) tested this by introducing children to stories that featured positive friendships between disabled and non-disabled children. The results were that most of the children, in their attitude and intended behaviour towards the disabled, became

more positive in nature. They argued for the use of such stories as a strong prejudice reduction tool.

Cameron & Rutland do note that for adults direct contact – the actual physical meeting between two different groups - may be more effective in reducing what they term as inter-group bias, but they also state that any potential anxiety that results from such a meeting could be reduced by having a period of extended contact first. Fiction then, if used correctly, can still have a useful impact on adults in reducing barriers and overcoming stereotypes between different people and cultures, though the simple act of engaging with those cultures may prove to be a better option.

4.2 British-Indian Fiction

There did not appear to be very much literature available on the issue of fair portrayals in British-Indian fiction. What literature there is seems more focused on discussing the various thematic trends that appear in the South-Asian genre in general. One such trend is the focus on the clash of cultures as a plot point.

Tan (2007) discusses a number of British-Indian works, focusing on this very theme of cultural dislocation, identity and being caught between two cultures. She states that Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane' is "grimly accurate" (Tan, 2007:228) and that the characters themselves explicitly discuss being caught between cultures, using that phrase in the novel itself whilst the author, Ali, describes it as the "two-camp split" (ibid.). The characters are described as being tragic due to this split.

On the other hand, Tan also discusses 'The Namesake' and 'The Interpreter of Maladies' by Jhumpa Lahiri which, she states, actually describes the state of being caught between two cultures as "decisively liberating and productive" (Tan, 2007: 231) for the author who utilises a "tone of gentle humour, even affection, for her characters" (ibid.). Tan concludes that the clash of cultures theme is not necessarily a negative and feels that Lahiri's characters are three dimensional and not at all stereotypical. Nonetheless she does point out in passing that 'The Namesake' received harsh criticism from Bengalis for not being representative of the totality of the Bengali immigrant experience. Tan is not herself from the Bengali community

and it is interesting to note that in her conclusion she once again argues that the clash of cultures theme can have positive aspects to it, though she does not again refer to the sentiments of the Bengali community.

Preston (2007) also touches on this theme in his discussion of Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' and, once again, Ali's 'Brick Lane.' Preston focuses on critiquing the writing styles as well as the themes, though in the context of this project he does make the interesting comment that 'Brick Lane' "is valuable in informing its readers about Bangladeshi life in Britain" (Preston, 2007: 11). His conclusion is that both novels end on an optimistic note, with some of the principal characters in 'Brick Lane,' in particular, liberated because of the "opportunities of life in England" (Preston, 2007: 13). He also states that both books would be written differently today because he believes that Muslim and Western values are currently in direct confrontation. This would mean that the Muslim characters in both books that were radicalised in response to British culture would have to be written more seriously than they are currently represented in both novels.

Preston briefly mentions that the Bangladeshi community found 'Brick Lane' to be upsetting, but does not go into further detail, nor does he wonder whether actual members of the British-Indian community would agree with his analysis, especially with regards to the presumed 'clash' between Muslim and Western values.

Afzal-Khan (1993) steps out of this theme and tries to look at the rationale behind many of the trends in the genre. She focuses in particular on cultural imperialism, whereby the dominant culture defines the other – consciously or unconsciously – as inferior and in need of improvement and guidance from the former. She argues that many of the early novels in the genre – written by authors from outside of the Indian community- do represent this view, even when they are trying to arouse empathy. For later novels, written by people native to the community, she states that some reinforce this view – which she terms as self-hating – whilst others provide a more liberating and sympathetic outlook. She believes the latter to be in the majority, however, and uses Salman Rushdie and others as examples of why this is so.

Afzal-Khan's work raises interesting questions. If it does come to be realised that there are novels from this genre that do reinforce elements of cultural imperialism, how then can those novels be trusted as a fair representation of the British-Indian community?

Taylor (1992), whilst not specifically looking at British-Indian fiction, does touch on the relationship between cultural imperialism and identity in general. He argues that identity is shaped by positive recognition – where each identity is appreciated and respected - and that what he terms as misrecognition can cause people to:

> "…suffer real damage, real distortion, if the
> …society around them mirror back to them
> a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture
> of themselves." (Taylor, 1992: 25).

One result of this, he argues, is that the people demeaned adopt the image of themselves that others portray upon them and thus become "the most potent instruments of their own oppression" (Taylor, 1992: 26). This he relates to the cultural and political imperialism of 15th Century Europeans who managed to impose an image of being 'uncivilised' upon the people they colonised. He relates it, too, to the issue of minorities, focusing on how the dominant white culture has, for some people, a negative image of blacks that some members of the latter consciously or unconsciously adopt. Here, then, the damage is not simply that the host culture will have a skewed view of another, but that the fact that perpetuating that skewed view can cause the minority cultures to suffer as well. Equal recognition between communities, Taylor argues, is the sign of a healthy society and he goes so far as to state that "the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression" (Taylor, 1992: 36).

With regards to fiction, he discusses the idea that the canon of approved authors (comprised mainly of male, white Europeans) needs to be changed to include women and other races. Afrocentric curricula is, he states, already being developed for schools with a majority black intake. This is something Yerby (2004), speaking

from an African-American perspective, might agree with, only for the reason that "readers want to see themselves represented in the texts that they read" (Yerby, 2004: 168). This is something that could be applied to any minority group, the British-Indian community included.

4.3 Libraries and the British-Indian Community

Again, there is very little relevant literature about libraries and the British-Indian community. What is available is research regarding ethnic minority provision and the issue of diversity.

Elliott (1999) provides a good overview of the trends encompassing research in this field from the 1970s to the end of the century. She identifies major themes that run through all such studies such as the need for consultation and co-operation between libraries and minority groups and training library professionals to acquire the skills required to work with diverse ethnic needs, both of which were amongst recommendations that Roach & Morrison had suggested in their seminal, more in-depth study from 1998 (Roach & Morrison, cited in Elliott, 1999). Elliott notes that the same recommendations were being made in both 1970s and the late 1990s and concludes that it is time for the library profession to take these recommendations on board.

Many of the recommendations involve the library making a cultural change. Matthews & Roper (1994) discuss this in the context of funding and ethnic minority provision, with specific reference to Section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act which was intended as a temporary initiative to meet the needs of new immigrants. They stress the importance of libraries being sensitive to minority needs, because if minorities feel they have no place in the library – in other words, if they feel socially excluded - then the library will lose a large number of its users. They refer to research initiatives by various local authorities that came to the conclusion that, with regards to minority policies and meeting minority needs, the whole organisation of the library would require a slow cultural change.

This cultural change is something Roach & Morrison (1999) also touch upon in a shorter follow-up to their 1998 study. They suggest that library ethnic minority policies need to move beyond simply providing items in community languages and should instead embrace the ethnic diversity in modern day Britain. They acknowledge that many libraries do not know what to do and that those libraries that have done something positive need to share best practice. Skills and attitudes need to change, they argue, to meet ethnically diverse needs. They ask the pertinent question: "Can libraries make a difference in the creation of a more equal, tolerant and pluralistic society…?" (Roach & Morrison, 1999: 113).

Barter (1996) attempts to answer this question in his discussion of the actual role of the librarian in building bridges between communities. Again, it is not focused on the British-Indian community, but Barter does tie into the idea of using fiction in creating empathy. He notes the benefits of libraries exposing people (children in particular) to a pluralistic world and criticises educators and librarians that believe multicultural books only creates cultural pride amongst ethnic students. He believes that such an exposure helps people to learn about their own culture and, quoting McElmeel, states "that is how [children] grow, become tolerant of differences and learn to respect others" (McElmeel, cited in Barter, 1996: 13).

Wolf (1992), in a commentary on Taylor's misrecognition theory, notes how, in her childhood, multicultural books were not seen in the library. She opined that the selection of that stock had been curtailed, not just by librarians, but editors and publishers as well.

The question of just how to select such stock is the focus of Durrani et al. (1999) in the context of the Black and Minority Stock Group undertaken by Hackney libraries who, at the time of that study, catered to a population where 48% were made up of minorities. 25% of the Hackney's stock fund was allocated to the selection of stock for the Black community and Black staff were involved in the selection process, thus empowering those members of staff. The experiment was a success, though this was partly attributed to "the presence of positive forces at a particular time" (Durrani et al, 1999: 23). Though reference was made to the South-Asian

community, the focus of the study was on Black stock selection. Nonetheless, the presence of such an initiative could be used as a template for other minority groups.

4.4 Gaps in the Literature and Justification of the Study

The gaps in the literature lead naturally to a justification of this study. Whilst there is research on the role of empathy and fiction, there is little that deals with this in relation to adults and minority communities. Again, whilst there is plenty of work done with regards to South-Asian fiction, there is little available in terms of academic study that specifically discusses fair portrayals in British-Asian fiction and how the British-Asian community views that fiction. Finally, whilst there is research on the role of libraries and ethnic minorities, there is little about libraries and the British- Asian community, and specifically how libraries handle, stock and promote English language fiction that the community feels is an unfair representation of them. On a side note, it is worth mentioning that there should be studies that deal specifically with libraries and each particular ethnic minority because to treat all minorities as one homogenous group is contrary to the diverse nature – and needs – of ethnic groups in modern day Britain.

It is hoped, then, that this study will participate with others that are taking the initial steps to remedy these gaps in the literature.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Response

5.1.1 Librarians

The librarian questionnaire was sent to 250 public libraries nationwide. It was also distributed on the lis-pub-libs e-mail list, with a membership of over 1,000 people and on the e-mail list of the Network. The questionnaire was also sent to individuals and organisations identified as having an interest in this particular area.

11 completed questionnaires were received from public libraries, giving a response rate of 4.4 %. No other responses were received via the other two e-mail sources. Of the individuals and organisations identified, none completed the form, though one did help to distribute it to the Network's e-mail list.

The following issues were noted from public libraries:

- One library stated that they could not complete the questionnaire until they had approval from their Customer Services Manager to do so. No further correspondence was received.

- Some libraries promised that they would pass the questionnaire on to the appropriate member of staff, usually identified as either the Stock Manager or the Multicultural Librarian. No further correspondence was received.

- Five libraries passed the questionnaire onto a South-Asian member of staff, despite there being nothing in the form itself to indicate that one particular ethnicity would be better qualified to answer the questionnaire than another. Of the five, only three completed the form.

- Some librarians apologised saying that they could not complete the form as stock selection was not part of their duties.

- Out of the eleven questionnaires received, only two librarians agreed to take part in a face-to-face interview. Only one was chosen due to the higher quality of answers received and the convenience in arranging a face-to-face interview. Another librarian was contacted for an e-mail interview, though he had not first completed a questionnaire.

5.1.2 The British-Indian Community

28 completed forms were received from the British-Indian community. As there were no figures available as to the potential reach of the questionnaires distributed, there was no way of establishing an accurate response rate; however, it can be assumed, given that the form was available online on message boards and forums with a potential audience of thousands, that the response rate was very low. Of the individuals and organisations identified as having a possible interest in this area, none completed the form.

17 of the 28 respondents were female (61%) and 25 from 28 were Muslim (89%). Most people were willing to take part in follow-up questions via e-mail.

5.1.3 Limitations Due to the Sample Size

Such a low response rate from both the community and library profession is problematic. Unfortunately, it means that no definitive conclusions can be drawn about both groups regarding the issues identified in this study. With the community questionnaires, Muslims made up 89% of the respondents, meaning that other faith based British-Indian communities, such as the Sikh and Hindu communities, and those of no faith, were not properly represented. This did lead to a possible overstatement into the issue of liberal as opposed to conservative values in fiction, as all who made reference to this issue were Muslims. This will be discussed further below.

There were, however, a number of other recurring themes that were apparent, and it is these areas that the rest of this project will discuss. Tentative recommendations will be made, though these will be stated with full awareness that they are based on a small sample.

5.2 Low Response

5.2.1 General

A number of respondents from both surveyed groups stated that they found the questionnaire 'difficult' though they did not elaborate why they thought this was so. Though steps were taken in the design process to make the form a mixture of both open-ended and closed questions, the open questions – which made up the bulk of the form – may have appeared too daunting for a lot of people.

The time and thought needed to answer open questions may have been unappealing to people from both groups; librarians in particular may have felt that completing the questionnaire would have taken time out from their work schedule.

A wholly closed question form with the option for further interviews may have been a better alternative. The flaw with this method is that it depended on respondents being willing to take part in a later interview. Had they not done so in a sufficiently large number then the qualitative aspect of this project would have been severely compromised.

5.2.2 Librarians

The sole face-to-face interviewee (hereafter identified as **Lib 8**) was asked about the low response rate from librarians. She offered the following possibilities:

Survey fatigue.

The summer period is a time when many libraries receive myriad surveys from students undertaking their research projects. Librarians may have found the number overwhelming and thus were not able to complete them all.

For this particular research project, however, the questionnaires were sent well in advance compared to other relative projects that centred on the library profession. This was a deliberate action designed to avoid the phenomenon described by the interviewee here. The public libraries were also sent a polite reminder two weeks after the initial contact, and whilst this did yield a marginally better response, the overall result was still poor.

Relevancy.

Librarians may not have felt that the topic in question was personally relevant to them or their libraries. If they were from a library authority that had a very low British-Indian population they may have felt that they did not need to make any provision for British-Indian fiction, thus they had no need to participate in the project.

On the other hand, the questionnaires were sent to libraries that not only had a high British-Indian population but some also had, judging from their individual websites, made some sort of effort in order to engage with that population. The vast majority of these particular libraries did not respond to the questionnaire.

Individual Reservations.

Individual librarians may have had reservations about completing the questionnaire for fear of being unfairly labelled as racist or being politically incorrect. This is also something the e-mail interviewee (hereafter identified as **Lib 12**) also suggested.

This perhaps is understandable as librarians were being canvassed by someone whom they were not familiar with and who was not familiar with them, thus there could have been a legitimate fear of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, even if they had been misunderstood, the results presented here in the project are all anonymous, so they would not have had to deal with any consequences.

Another reservation **Lib 8** mentioned was the fact that it would have been difficult for one librarian to have an overview of the whole stock selection process as there are usually different people doing different parts of the selection. One particular librarian then may not have felt that it was their place to answer the questionnaire.

A simple solution to this would have been for librarians to forward the questionnaire onto the most suitably qualified member of staff – such as the Stock Manager - something that was promised by a number of libraries, but failed to follow through on.

Ethnic Community Teams.

On the issue of passing the questionnaire onto a South-Asian member of staff, **Lib 8** stated that this may not have been as unusual as it initially appeared. In her own library the Ethnic Communities Team is comprised of people from different ethnic backgrounds, each of whom are responsible for their own ethnic community. So, for example, in that particular library, the Pakistani member of the team would be responsible for services only for the Pakistani community. It then becomes natural for that librarian to deal with all issues even remotely related to that group. Libraries with similar teams may then have passed the questionnaire onto the South-Asian member of staff simply because they equated the British-Indian aspect of the topic more suitable for that particular librarian even though the questionnaire was not intended to be used as such. Again, **Lib 12** also made this identification.

The Initial Question.

The first question on the form was about stock selection of British-Indian fiction. This may have put staff off and it may have been the reason why some librarians apologised with the reason that they were not involved in stock selection and thus could not complete the form.

The form here could have been designed better as the community questionnaire opened with an 'easy' closed question that would not make that form seem daunting. The librarian questionnaire could have had a similar design. On the other hand, it should be noted that questions 3-10 were not related to stock selection and the initial e-mail clearly stated that they were not obliged to answer all the questions.

Overall, it is difficult to extrapolate an exact reason as to why there was such a low response from librarians. What is surprising, given the government's 'Libraries for all' policy of social inclusion (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1999), is that librarians did not see themselves as contributors to any potential research related to it. Given the 4.4% response rate, it is reasonable to assume that librarians simply were not interested in the topic at hand; though whether this was because they failed to engage with the topic or because they did not wish to take the time out to participate is something that only they themselves know.

5.2.3 The British-Indian Community

It was easier to pinpoint a reason for the low response rate here. A number of people from the British-Indian community apologised for not being able to complete the questionnaire, stating a non-involvement with reading fiction. This was also a theme even amongst those who did complete the form and could be seen as one of the primary reasons contributing to a low response rate. The belief amongst the respondents was that many people in the community simply do not read fiction and, of those that do, are either unaware of British-Indian fiction or simply find it unappealing. There may have been people – particularly amongst the Muslim community - who were disillusioned about the subject matter due to the fact that they

felt that they would always be portrayed unfairly and there would be no change in this. All of these issues will be expanded upon further on.

5.3 The British-Indian Community

5.3.1 Fiction in General and the British-Indian Community

A number of respondents stated that they do not read fiction – or books - in general. Comments such as the following were common:

"I don't read fiction. I'm not a big reader, unfortunately." **Comm 1**

"...I don't really read widely." **Comm 2**

"I don't read a lot of books." **Comm 3**

This was reinforced by the fact that many people apologised for not completing the form, citing a non-involvement in reading fiction as a reason.

A follow-up question about why people thought fiction was so unpopular revealed the following answers:

"[Reading fiction] is something I have
never taken an interest in. Even as
a child I was never encouraged [to read].
I regret this now." **Comm 1**

"Reading in general is not as encouraged
as it should be. Many parents of the
previous generation were not able to
dedicate much time to their children…
to emphasise the importance of reading…" **Comm 4**

A respondent from a teaching background offered the following:

"It's unfortunate that our illiteracy…speaks for itself. Our elders came to this country with the objective of a better lifestyle…not educational pursuits.

"…I have seen children from mainly Asian backgrounds [who] dislike reading, seeing it as a burden!

"…going to the library is not 'cool' despite the fact that their reading ages are well below average…" **Comm 7**

Based on the response to the community questionnaire alone - including the fact that many people apologised for not completing the form – the lack of interest in fiction is an issue. A love of reading was not inculcated into the second generation due to the first generation coming to the country for economic objectives alone and with no intention at that time of settling permanently. If, as the respondents believe, the first generation were motivated only by an economic context, then clearly reading fiction had no value.

Those that did read fiction had interest in a diverse area of genres – from drama and crime to fantasy – and provided equally diverse rationale for reading what they did:

"[I read fiction] because I feel it is important to be globally versed." **Comm 7**

"…[to] help me escape reality." **Comm 8**

"[I like to read realistic stories to] find some form of inspiration." **Comm 2**

"[I like to read the Classics as] the prose is engaging and you can [learn] about history, politics, philosophy and even spirituality." **Comm 9**

"…[to learn] about the world I live in and [to learn]
something new." **Comm 10**

"[I read] novels that tackle issues beneath the surface of the text." **Comm 6**

"…to provoke thought and stimulate discussion [with other people]" **Comm 5**

"[To read about] real emotions. Feelings, because you
want a true reflection of reality." **Comm 11**

"When I was younger, I liked fiction related to
different cultures." **Comm 12**

Non-fiction, on the other hand, may have had the value that the first generation felt fiction lacked, not only because it could assist in one's professional development but it could also help to preserve the beliefs and ideals of one's culture. One respondent, on the topic of the first generation's lack of encouragement in reading, stated:

"…so long as the religious books were read,
this was considered sufficient." **Comm 4**

When asked whether she also read non-fiction, she said:

"Yes. For…Islamic knowledge, to learn and practice
my religion…As well as books on Islamic law and
spirituality , I like reading travelogues, books on Islamic history,
Islamic arts, and books on alternative medicine and other
health and well-being issues." **Comm 4**

The respondent has a background in medicine so this reinforces the idea of people from the community reading non-fiction as a tool for professional

development. Unfortunately, due to the sample size, nothing definitive can be concluded. Other respondents who were asked about whether they read non-fiction did not reply to the question. Those who answered that they read religious non-fiction were all Muslims, so it is difficult to know whether this applies to other faith communities as well.

Nonetheless, a study by the Reading Agency of 500 BME readers (of which 25% were South Asian) stated that 46% read books in general for self-improvement whilst 24% read for religious purposes (The Reading Agency, 2007). The same study declared that only a third were heavy readers (defined as reading at least one book a month) and that of all the books that this sample purchased, 55% were fiction. 39% of the sample stated that they only read 1-4 books a year.

Whilst one of the premises of this project is the promotion of fair portrayals in fiction regarding the British-Indian community in order to create empathy and strengthen community relations, this works both ways. If, as suggested by this sample, the British-Indian community do not read fiction, then they too will be unable to empathise with other communities, something Barter (1996) notes about a lack of exposure to multicultural fiction in general. This then is problematic as this isolates that community and reinforces stereotypes and misconceptions that they, too, may have about others. Living in a multicultural society as we do, such an attitude would be counterproductive to good community relations. It may also lead to a situation where some members of the community wish that they were better understood and represented whilst, at the same time, they are unwilling to provide the same for others – in other words, there is no equal recognition amongst the different communities (Taylor, 1992). This creates resentment and thus weakens community relations.

Fiction is not the only way that empathy can be created. If, however, the British-Indian community does not consider fiction important, then it is one tool that is not being utilised to its potential. Whilst it is notable that non-fiction tends to be read for various reasons, Mar et al (2006) note the higher capacity for empathy and social skills amongst fiction readers over non-fiction readers.

5.3.2 Perception of British-Indian Fiction in the Community

An overwhelming number of respondents commented negatively towards British-Indian fiction, especially with regards to how the community is portrayed therein:

*"Most of the time [the genre] is exaggerated
and makes [the community] look bad."* **Comm 5**

*"...it's slightly irritating that many of these works
only tackle characters and situations where a British-Indian
has completely 'rebelled' against his/her culture and a
caricature of a very Westernised British-Indian is presented..."* **Comm 6**

*"... was a complete misrepresentation of the
community and Asian family values.*

"It is as if the author had a grudge against the Asian community." **Comm 13**

"...in general the characters...lived up to the usual stereotypes." **Comm 9**

*"I don't think I [could] fully relate [to the stories]...
a lot of it stems around themes such as marriage - forced marriage [in
particular]- cropping up all too frequently for my liking."* **Comm 14**

*"...[books from this genre] tend to be cheesy 'aeroplane fiction'
that doesn't tackle any deep issues of life on a serious level."* **Comm 6**

Asking what aspects they specifically disliked revealed a similar theme:

*"...these books are dominated by themes of being
'torn between two cultures' when, in fact, that isn't the
primary concern of all British-Indians."* **Comm 6**

"...not all Asians are as 'Westernised' as portrayed [in the genre] ..."
Comm 9

Identity issues, then, are not considered to be a topic that either appeals to or reflects the sensibilities of many of the respondents. It could be extrapolated here that these particular respondents are, in general, well-adjusted and quite comfortable with their identities. The respondents found it "irritating" that not only were they being portrayed as having these issues, but that the characters in the books seem always to have chosen their adopted culture over their native one, something that many of the respondents did not feel ring true with their own experiences. This is in marked contrast to Tan's (2007) study who not only felt that the theme was worth exploring but argued that it could lead to positive repercussions as well. Tan does not question once whether the culture clash motif is a fair representation of the South-Asian experience – perhaps a proof in itself that unfair portrayals do have an effect on their readers, even those from an educated and academic background.

A potential implication that may arise from focusing on identity issues is that it could foster the image of British-Indian people being unable to choose between cultures and so are equally unable – or find it difficult - to integrate at all. Such a misunderstanding – a "misrecognition" as Taylor (1992: 25) terms it - is clearly damaging to potential community relations.

'Brick Lane' by Monica Ali was singled out by some as an example of poor British-Indian fiction:

"'Brick Lane' was a huge disappointment. I felt that
the story was slow-moving and not well-written." **Comm 15**

"...the prose was dull and the characters two-dimensional.
There was nothing there about the vibrancy and complexity
of life in Brick Lane. All in all, a tedious read." **Comm 9**

"'Brick Lane' [contained] false and poor stereotypes." **Comm 11**

"'Brick Lane' – that book was awful. I was quite offended
that the author spoke of studying at the Open University
in such a negative way; many people cannot afford to
[physically] attend universities and have to rely on distance learning."
Comm 14

"['Brick Lane' and 'White Teeth'] don't have any
positive representation of our community...especially with regards
to [marital] relationships...[The married characters] just seem to be two
people living together with no warmth or love...Maybe some relationships are like
that...its unrealistic to think that all Asian couples can't stand each other."
Comm 15

There was not one single respondent who enjoyed the novel, though the following, critical as she was, had this to say:

"Whilst I didn't find the characters convincing, Ali did show
the resilience of Asian women when faced with [various] difficulties.

"[The drugs problem mentioned in the book] is an issue for
large sections of the community, particularly in Brick Lane itself; these are
urgent problems that need to be addressed.

"I wouldn't say that Ali was inaccurate in describing situations experienced
by the community. There [just] didn't seem to be a stable character and
they all seemed to have identity issues." **Comm 9**

It is interesting to note the diversity in opposition to the book. Whilst some did feel that the book was unfair to the community, others simply disliked the book because of its writing style and others still were offended by an issue – the portrayal of Open University students - unrelated to the community at all. The common theme

of having identity issues – clearly something that does not resonate with many of the respondents – came up yet again.

The respondents were not, however, asking their communities to be portrayed in a completely idealistic manner. They seemed well aware of the problems within their communities but wished that more of the positive traits were portrayed as well as the negative. On 'Brick Lane,' the last respondent commented:

> *"Yet there are positive things about the community, which*
> *aren't really expressed in the book."* **Comm 9**

Whilst in general, one respondent complained:

> *"[Some of the books] concentrate on the negative*
> *aspects of the culture without providing a balanced view."* **Comm 15**

There were some positive comments regarding the genre as a whole:

> *"It was comforting to read about lives similar to my own*
> *while I was growing up as a minority."* **Comm 4**

Other respondents mentioned specific stories as positive examples, such as 'The Buddha of Suburbia' by Hanif Kureishi and 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' by Salman Rushdie:

> *"['The Buddha of Suburbia'] presents a very rich and complex*
> *portrayal of Asian life in Britain. I think the characters*
> *are well-rounded and not simply seen as good or bad."* **Comm 10**

> *"'['The Ground Beneath Her Feet']…describes the hopes, fears,*
> *dreams, uncertainties and expectations of immigrant Asians…It resonated*
> *with me as I am an immigrant myself who has gone through these*
> *experiences…"* **Comm 16**

Other respondents, however, cited both authors as poor examples of the genre.

Others only saw the genre as fiction alone without any need to relate it constantly to the British-Indian community:

> *"Fiction does not need to be a reflection of true reality. I wouldn't*
> *recommend any book as a good example of British-Indian*
> *fiction, but ask them to be taken for what they are!"* **Comm 17**

> *"After all, we're all humans – everybody (whether British-Indian or not)*
> *has concerns of deeper issues about life and death…"* **Comm 6**

> *"I don't really think in terms of 'community' and how it's being portrayed…*
> *just individuals."* **Comm 18**

3 of the 28 respondents were unaware that such a genre even existed.

Part of the 7th question on the form asked why the respondents felt that the author had included any negative portrayals of the community. The following stated:

> *"[It was done] to dramatise [the story] and keep the*
> *audience interested."* **Comm 15**

> *"…to generate readability. Readers are uninterested in run-of the mill,*
> *boring day-to-day lives. They often read to escape from life…"* **Comm 4**

> *"[With reference to 'Brick Lane'] …I think the author's sole reason to*
> *include these scenes was her obvious need to be accepted by*
> *Western society as one of these women who isn't afraid to speak out and*
> *embrace her own sexuality."* **Comm 14**

These were the only replies received to this particular question. In general, the respondents from the community did not find British-Indian fiction appealing, nor did they find it a fair portrayal. Though one respondent stated that it was "irritating,"

it would appear that many did not attribute this to a deliberate act of causing offence as they were aware that there was a dramatic need for such portrayals.

Nonetheless, as the last quote shows, there was at least one respondent who took a cynical view of the author's intentions. This translates well into real life events as it was only a vocal minority that protested against, for example, 'Brick Lane' whilst most of the community were silent, a protest that one respondent described as an "overreaction."

The point that negative portrayals are used only for dramatic intent presupposes the idea that only negative events and characters make good stories. A skilled writer may be able to incorporate more positive traits, more so when speaking about a different culture as some of the traits may be 'exotic' to unfamiliar readers and this may lend to the story an entirely different aspect of entertainment. Wolf (1992) notes how her own children gravitate towards juvenile fiction of this nature simply for this very reason.

Who, then, is this genre aimed at? Many of the respondents from the community did not feel it was for them. If, then, it is for those outside of the community, what value would such readers find in stories that one respondent stated were heavily biased towards the 'torn between two cultures' theme? Moreover, many respondents felt that the characters were too Westernised and not at all representative of people from the community. In short, the characters were portrayed as being rife with identity issues and divided between two cultures from which they had leant towards one of them – Western culture.

Could it be argued, then, that the novels are nothing more than emotional validation aimed at those who wish to feel that their culture is superior to others? This is not to say that all people who read these novels have such an intention, but to say that the publisher's target audience may very well be people with such a motive. The hypothesis is problematic due to its racist undertones and, instead of using fiction as a tool for empathy, fiction becomes instead a tool used to perpetuate a false and demeaning image which, for Taylor (1992), is damaging to all in society, regardless of ethnic background. Wolf (1992), in particular, blames publishers and

editors in "the authors they [choose] to cultivate and encourage" (Wolf, 1992: 82) and for not recognising the "potential to interest, please, and...reward" (ibid.) that multicultural fiction with positive portrayals can have.

The emotional validation proposition was placed to some of the respondents, one of whom went into a lot of detail:

"I agree partly. [I think] the books are aimed at both Asians and Westerners.

"...it's a Catch 22 for authors, since the British-Indian culture is ever changing, and sometimes books lag in identifying the issues that are 'current.'

"...I think Asian culture has evolved [away from] concerns such as forced marriages in present day UK. Topics of concern like gun culture, nationalism, racism, teenage pregnancy, disillusionment are a lot more prevalent now…

"...I don't think that a deliberate depiction of a 'superior' Western culture is intended. In order to appeal to a Western audience (and 2nd generation British-Indians who do not have a strong connection to their parents' culture), the British-Indian characters are satirised in order to have a more universal appeal.

"What I find distasteful is the overuse of overtly idiotic and satirical characters – a bit of subtlety and careful usage helps!

"I do agree that elements of a purely 'Western' culture are only incorporated into these books to appeal to a Western audience, but it often becomes cliché. I mean, Michael Ondatjee has been recognised for his brilliant portrayal of Indian culture…but he doesn't enforce a superficial 'Western' backdrop of characters. [Such an enforcement] seems to work for authors who aim to get their novel made into a Hollywood movie ('Bride and Prejudice')…" **Comm 6**

So even if there was some emotional validation happening, this particular respondent does not believe it to be deliberate, believing instead that the 'clash of cultures' motif is a stylistic choice intended to appeal to as many people as possible.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that none of the respondents mentioned any British-Indian novels that portrayed in a positive manner characters that chose their ethnic culture over their adopted Western culture, or any who had successfully synthesised the two.

Publishers known to have produced British-Indian fiction in the past were contacted via e-mail for the purpose of this project and asked to describe the audience they targeted this genre at. At time of writing, none had responded.

What could be happening here is the cultural imperialism that Afzal-Khan (1993) states is inherent in some novels within the genre, where the 'alien' culture is deliberately portrayed to be inferior to the dominant culture so that the latter can be seen as a source of guidance for the former. Whilst it is more common amongst authors writing about a community they do not belong to, it does occur in 'native' authors as well. Regarding the former, she writes that the West, two centuries previous had decided:

> *"...that the Orient and everything in it...*
> *was, if not definitely inferior to, then in need of*
> *improvement by the West. Since the West's was the more*
> *powerful culture, Western writers possessed certain*
> *privileges: they could...give shape and meaning*
> *to the 'great Asiatic mystery'"* (Afzal-Khan 1993: 3).

Afzal-Khan mentions that such works were written not for understanding or to create empathy, but to justify the political and social imperialism that Western governments at the time were engaging in. That cultural imperialism apparently still appears in the genre – and from non-Western writers - almost two centuries later is not a very encouraging sign, though she herself attributes this to validation and not political dominance:

"The [Western] writer…attempting to validate
himself and his group…ends up confining himself to the limited…
economic and socio-political interests of his class or group." (Afzal-Khan
1993: 2).

A pertinent question could then be asked: how do the modern authors of these novels view themselves? For if they see themselves as wholly Western, then that may explain why they write about characters that choose the dominant culture over the native culture. It would also make Afzal-Khan's comments especially relevant to them, regardless of their ethnic background. Perhaps, too, the authors are following the theory that Taylor (1992) espoused where a dominant culture imposes upon another culture a demeaning image which some people from the wronged culture then adopt unconsciously.

It should be noted, though, that Afzal-Khan in general believes that most of the genre written by 'native' authors tend to use liberating and sympathetic themes as opposed to a theme of cultural imperialism. This conclusion, however, does not seem to ring true with the views of many of the respondents from the community.

Perhaps the answer to whom this genre is written for and what purpose may not be found in academic circles at all. Orhan Pamuk's novel 'Snow' is set in Turkey, but according to non-professional reviews on Amazon.com, one of the themes covered is how certain societies are not represented in fiction. Another theme is how readers accept what they read in such novels in order to see themselves as "wise and superior and humanistic" (Smith, 2005). The validation here is less cultural and more personal, though the latter may have arisen because of the standards set by the former.

What remains to be seen is whether those outside of the British-Indian community were aware that the portrayal of South Asians in the novels was not wholly true-to-life but had many dramatised and exaggerated aspects to it. This will

be discussed further on when analysing what librarians had to say about British-Indian fiction.

5.3.3 Conservative versus Liberal Values

Whilst the actual portrayal of the community may not have caused deep offence, the values perceived to be in the genre did for some. One criticism that came from some of the Muslim respondents was that they disliked the genre because it promoted liberal values, whilst the community itself was still very conservative. This was highlighted by comments such as:

"Western values such as fornication and promiscuity
are shown to be the natural thing to do." **Comm 13**

"I strongly feel that most of the stories I have read [in this genre]
conflict with my morals and values…Most of these books would
now be offensive to me…[I dislike] writers such as
Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, purely as they misrepresent
Islamic values…as well as Muslims." **Comm 4**

"The Buddha of Suburbia was too licentious. There was a lot of
lewdness…I don't see how being gratuitously lewd…is positive." **Comm 9**

A follow up question was asked about why people felt these values were included. Only two replies were received, one that stated again that it was for dramatic purposes, whilst the other said:

"…in the literary market anything goes. If you want to become
famous and a literary star just write against Islam because that's
what people are doing. In Kureishi's fiction [for example]
homosexuality is discussed and it overshadows his own beliefs." **Comm 7**

People like to see themselves represented in fiction (Yerby, 2004) and, if this is not happening, then they do not have a voice in this medium. Without a voice, not only could they feel alienated from the whole medium itself – as evidenced by the above respondent who clearly feels quite negative towards the whole literary profession – but others are not able to learn and empathise with them. They thus become a victim of misrecognition, something that is detrimental to both host and minority communities (Taylor, 1992).

Another question was asked about whether those particular respondents would read fiction that represented their values and whether or not such a genre would be popular with the white community.

"The ideals in the Asian subcontinent have always been simple…justice, freedom and respect. [I think] there are some very good audiences in the white community who would appreciate reading such a novel…" **Comm 7**

"There are many of the 'white' community who hold traditional, conservative ideas. I would imagine that, in fact, these [people] ...would be open to literature written by ethnic 'minorities.'" **Comm 4**

These issues were posed to the **Lib 8** who agreed that all the fiction she had read in this genre did seem to have 'liberal' ideas and seemed aimed at a 'liberal' audience. She suggested that publishers could be lobbied to provide more conservative fiction and also suggested that such a genre may mirror the white working class family sagas that were already on the shelves. She also added, however, that the liberal British-Indian fiction available now must represent someone, even if only the author.

Such ideas may be difficult to put into practise. Publishers are probably more motivated by economic factors than by the need to give a voice to everyone in society. They may feel that a conservative British-Indian novel may have a limited audience and thus would not be cost-effective to produce.

So far, many of the criticisms of British-Indian fiction have been targeted at well-known authors such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and Monica Ali. It may be that there are lesser-known authors who are producing the type of fiction that may appeal to them and they are simply unaware of their existence.

Independent publishers may promote such fiction. Monsoon Press, for example, aims to "redress the under-representation of ethnic literature and promote diversity in publishing" (Monsoon Press, 2007). Their sole publication to date is "The A-Z Guide to Arranged Marriage" by Rekha Waheed. This title was mentioned by only one of the respondents who recommended it as an example of good British-Indian fiction.

It is difficult to gauge how important conservative values are to other sections of the British-Indian community, such as those of the Hindu and Sikh faiths, those of no faith and even non-conservative Muslims, as only three non-Muslims replied and only one mentioned the issue of conservative values:

"Perhaps the notion of combining the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll
lifestyle with an Indian character may be controversial [for some]. It
did not cause offence to me but 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' is not a book
for conservative readers! I don't think…these themes…negatively
represent the Indian community or myself. So I took these themes as detached
from my life. [It was not] a comment on Indian people embracing
destructive 'Western' cultural attitudes…any attempt to make real world
social commentary is almost defeated in the magical-realist style prose."
Comm 16

If nothing else, such comments show that the community is not monolithic and plays host to diverse tastes and opinions. Such diversity could be celebrated in fiction by giving each of these tastes a distinct, unique and fair voice. As shown by what many of the respondents have said thus far, people do not feel everyone is being given this voice.

The misrepresentation that the Muslim respondents felt was prevalent may have contributed to the low response from other members of the Muslim community. There is widespread disillusionment amongst that particular community about how it is currently portrayed in the media. The Muslim Public Affairs Committee, UK, for example, headlined one of their news articles with the provocative statement "All Muslims are animals and deserve to die…we must uproot the evil religion of Islam from the UK and world" (MPAC UK, 2008) before clarifying that:

"...this is the message that is going out to all non-Muslims about YOU. The words or images on TV, radio, newspapers and other forms of media might be different but the message is the same: 'Muslims and Islam are evil'" (ibid.).

Whilst none of the respondents claimed that the Muslim community was being portrayed in quite such a fashion in fiction, there is a feeling amongst the community of being 'under siege' (BBC News, 2008a) in general and this is confirmed by research by Cardiff University that stated most media coverage of the Muslim community is wholly negative in tone (BBC News, 2008b). As such, it may not be so surprising that other members of the same community did not wish to take part in this project as they may have felt that an unfair portrayal – even in fiction – was all to familiar to them and may have been too disillusioned to press for change.

One prominent member of the British Muslim community is Tim Winter of Cambridge University (also known as Abdul Hakim Murad). A white convert, he gave his own thoughts on 'Brick Lane' to the BBC:

"...I have to confess that I did find it inaccurate and stereotypical. If I didn't [already] know the Bangladeshis of East London [personally] ... I would probably close the book with some hostile attitudes towards them." (BBC, 2006).

He criticised the fact that the community had to resort to protests in order to express their dissatisfaction and recommended that they instead "seek out and publicise books…which they feel will portray them accurately" (ibid.). He learned, too, from experience that:

"… publishers… are reluctant to commission…novels
which portray Muslim cultures positively, since they felt, as one publisher
put it, that readers would be 'confused,' and the book would not sell." (ibid.)

This reveals a disturbing attitude on behalf of the publishers, not only towards the Muslim community, but towards their own readers as well. Though, as mentioned earlier, the issue of economic viability is a factor, here it is not because they believe there is a limited audience for positive portrayals but because such a portrayal would confuse readers who, it must be assumed, must be expecting that only a negative portrayal can be considered authentic.

It could again be concluded, as **Lib 8** suggested, that British-Indian fiction is not really aimed solely at a conservative British-Indian community but at a liberal audience; indeed, the librarian suggested it was a "middle class, educated," audience. The motive, then, in portraying the community in a manner that they themselves do not agree with is problematic. Well-intentioned readers may believe they are learning something about this community when, in reality, they are being shown a dramatised version that is less about education and more about entertainment. The publisher's intent is again called into question and again it could be argued that publishers are still perpetuating the cultural imperialism that Afzal-Khan (1993) describes. It would also appear that some quarters of the media, in their portrayal of the Muslim community, appear to be very enthusiastic practitioners of this type of imperialism.

Again, the British-Indian community itself may find it enlightening to learn about other communities, either through the extended contact in fiction that Cameron & Rutland (2006) describe or via other means, such as simple direct contact and engaging with the 'other.' A Westerner may, for example, find it strange that one of the respondents named 'promiscuity' as a 'Western value.' The community may also want to search out other British-Indian authors outside of the well-known Rushdie, Ali and Kureishi trio as they may find there exactly what they are looking for. The pertinent question is: are these other authors, assuming they exist, being promoted enough?

5.3.4 The British-Indian Community and Libraries.

Of the 28 respondents, 15 stated that they prefer to purchase works of fiction as opposed to borrow from the library (53%), 5 preferred using the library (18%) and 8 had no preference (29%). The following comments were common:

"Not been to a library in a very long time…" **Comm 17**

"The last time I visited my local library was
around 10 years ago…" **Comm 6**

"I tend not to go to my library that often…" **Comm 19**

This contrasts slightly with the Reading Agency study that notes that 72% of its 500 person sample were library users, and of that number 25% were lapsed users (The Reading Agency, 2007). Again, only 25% of that total sample was South – Asian, so it is difficult to pinpoint an exact number with regards to British-Indian library use. The study did state that people in the sample (of an unspecified number) preferred to buy than borrow as they liked to own their own books.

When rating the provision of British-Indian fiction by their local libraries on a scale from 'Poor' to 'Excellent', 8 respondents gave a rating of 'Poor' (29%), 6 gave a rating of 'Fair' (21%), 9 gave a rating of 'Average' (32%), 4 gave a rating of 'Good' (14%), there were no ratings for 'Excellent' and one respondent did not answer stating that he had not visited his local library.

Two of the respondents who rated their library 'Poor' stated that they were unaware of British-Indian fiction as a genre. In the question about the promotion of British-Indian fiction, one gave partial responsibility to the library itself:

"…I never knew there were British-Indian books…
[I] must contribute this to the fact that the publicity of such books
haven't been addressed [by the library]." **Comm 19**

Other respondents who rated their library 'Poor' said the following about British-Indian fiction promotion:

"Usually [the books] are kept/displayed in
a secluded part of the library." **Comm 23**

"I don't think there is any emphasis on
such work. It [would] be useful if they did some promotion
work of some of the more popular writers." **Comm 21**

Those who rated their library 'Good' mentioned the following:

"The local library organises cultural awareness
weeks that promote books written by British-Indian authors.
It also displays work around the main entrance." **Comm 3**

"[They have specific] book displays." **Comm 4**

"I believe this type of fiction is adequately
displayed and promoted but [only]
for a very short length of time." **Comm 16**

Other respondents had more pragmatic views:

"...it could be that certain libraries have very few
British-Asian members and so they feel such books
aren't in demand." **Comm 20**

"My local library neither displays [nor] promotes
this type of fiction. The reason for this is that there are only a handful
of Asian families in our village and therefore the library mainly
focuses on the wider community and their interests." **Comm 15**

"The library doesn't really promote this type of fiction;
it may not have the resources to do so." **Comm 12**

One respondent addressed the lack of promotion of the library's other services:

"I haven't really seen them promote [the genre]; we have a little
section which promotes various themes on a [regular]
basis. These themes vary a great deal from seasonal
events to specific events; I haven't seen any promotion
like this for British-Indian themes…They do also have the
ability to order in books from other libraries (something
else which is not really promoted unless you approach
library staff)." **Comm 14**

Here the respondent criticises not only the lack of support for the genre, but was also unaware – until she had asked the staff, presumably - of other services the library provides, such as the inter-library loan. If the community is not aware of what the library has to offer then they may not be motivated enough to use the service. It may be, too, that the libraries have promoted the genre in the past, though it would appear that, if they had, their promotion itself was not promoted enough.

One respondent noted that his local library had good links with the Black community – and had run promotions of Black fiction – but not the South-Asian community. He did not, however, fault the library for this:

"I think people from [the Asian community] tend to distance
themselves from such interaction. " **Comm 7**

When asked if the library could do anything to engage with the community, he stated:

"Reading should be encouraged primarily at home
by the parents. Libraries should host events and make
[the community] familiar with the book [catalogues] and help
them understand the importance of reading as I believe its
statistically proven…how Asian kids leave school [without knowing how
to] read or write. It's traumatising." **Comm 7**

It would appear that even if there were British-Indian authors that did give a fair portrayal of the community, people are not aware of them because the library – assuming that they themselves know of such authors - has not promoted them to a satisfactory degree. Not only could the library promote such fiction – and to all communities, not just the British-Indian one – they need to promote the totality of their services so that people are aware of what they have to offer.

The British-Indian community, for its part, also needs to be proactive in engaging with these services. They may then find that they are able to obtain the kind of novels that appeal to them, and even if they cannot, they can request their library to find some for them.

5.4 Librarians

5.4.1 Fiction as a Tool for Empathy

Questions 6 and 7 on the form asked if librarians agreed that fiction is a good medium to learn about different communities and a good way to build bridges between the host community and minority communities. All but two of the librarians answered 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' to both of these questions. Of the other two librarians one answered 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' to question 6 and 'Agree' to question 7, whilst the other answered 'Agree' to 6 and 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' to 7.

"[Fiction teaches that often] the same human experiences and problems can be faced by people from any ethnic group." **Lib 1**

"A good narrative can [help one] to see cultures from a different perspective from that portrayed in the media.

"...reading is a way of understanding better. Understanding involves consideration and being considerate is a higher human behaviour." **Lib 2**

"*You get an insight into the lives of people living in different cultures and traditions [and can see] their reaction to mainstream culture."* **Lib 3**

"[Fiction] can raise awareness of the similarities and differences between people in their lives, culture and experiences." **Lib 4**

"[Fiction] can make you think more deeply about an issue you have [not previously] considered…[you can] gain insight into a different culture.

"...a novel can help you see and understand things from the point of view of the people within that community." **Lib 5**

All of this is good from a theoretical point of view, and it seems clear that librarians are aware of the concept -if not the name - of extended contact (Cameron & Rutland, 2006), but it remains to be seen whether this translates into actual library practice.

5.4.2 The Role of the Librarian

Question 8 on the form asks librarians whether they agree that they have a responsibility in choosing fiction that portrays the British-Indian community in a fair and positive manner. Results were mixed with one librarian disagreeing – without further elaboration – 4 stating that they 'neither agree nor disagree' and 6 answering either 'agree' or 'strongly agree.'

A wide variety of opinions were expressed:

"Library stock should reflect the requirements of the community and promote the human condition…" **Lib 1**

"…I think you need to be careful how that is applied as anything remotely critical [could be] excluded from stock…" **Lib 5**

"…negative experiences are just as valid and help us all learn." **Lib 6**

"Libraries should be doing this for all sections of the community…" **Lib 7**

"I think this is quite a thorny issue…

"There are two issues [here]: accuracy and positiveness. [With the first] a 'community' is going to involve such a…range of lives and experiences that it may not be easy to determine what is accurate or not. I would hope that gross inaccuracies would be picked up [before publishing]…

"…regarding positive fiction…you [need] some of both, because people's lives are a mixture of both." **Lib 8**

"I think that…lives and experiences should be
accurately portrayed, but I'm not sure whether this portrayal
should always be positive. For example, a novel
may be about a British-Indian character experiencing difficulties
with the combination of Indian and British culture…For the outcome to
be positive, would the person have to realise the value of Indian culture
and abandon British culture? If this is what positive means, then I don't
agree as the [character's] investigation of the situation can lead to many
outcomes which may not be considered positive…" **Lib 4**

This last comment is interesting as the librarian has chosen for her example the whole identity crisis issue. The community respondents may find it disturbing that such an idea is already rooted in the librarian's mind, given that they dislike such a portrayal and see themselves as much more than that.

This shows quite a large difference of perception between that particular librarian and the feelings of the respondents from the British-Indian community who consider such a theme not only cliché but irrelevant to their own experiences. They certainly did not see as positive the theme of choosing Western culture over South Asian culture; a theme they found to be constant in the fiction they had read. The ideal solution would be to have characters that had managed to synthesise the two cultures, something neither group of respondents mentioned, nor does it appear if such works – if the publishers are producing them – are being that widely-read.

Perhaps, though, even librarians could be partially excused, especially as some of the academic works on the topic of a clash of cultures – such as Tan (2007) and Preston (2007) – identified that the theme was recurrent in the genre, but also seemed to believe it a positive thing that could bring insights about the community for the outsider. They did not consider – or felt it irrelevant – the feelings and perceptions of actual people from that community who did not share that view. If even some academics are not immune to having their perceptions of a community skewed by fiction, who could blame librarians for following suit?

Nonetheless, if librarians are to play a part in social inclusion they should be aware of Taylor's (1992) misrecognition theory. The genre itself may be imposing a demeaning image upon the British-Indian community – after all, if people from the community are seen to be constantly torn between cultures, how can they be trusted to integrate fully? – and for librarians to perpetuate that image, even unconsciously, can cause the wronged community to "suffer real damage [and] real distortion" (Taylor, 1992: 25) and "can be a form of oppression" (Taylor, 1992:36). This last point, though, would be the worst-case scenario.

With the librarians surveyed there seemed to have been a misunderstanding between the idea of the negative portrayal of the community as opposed to the use of negative characters and situations. The respondents from the community certainly did not see the latter as the issue, but instead the former. This misunderstanding, however, may have been a result of the wording of the question that may not have made the distinction quite so clear.

Question 9 on the form asked whether librarians should refuse to stock work that the British-Indian community finds offensive. One answered that they 'Agree,' 2 stated that 'Neither agree nor disagree,' and 8 either said that they 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree.'

Most of the librarians believed that to agree would be an invitation to censorship:

"This would be censorship. If the work is acceptable within the cultural expectations of the host community, it should be stocked." **Lib 4**

"We are not here to censor." **Lib 6**

"I find censorship more worrying than offending particular communities." **Lib 7**

> *"All views should be represented by the library. Library
> users are free to select or borrow…they define offensive and
> controversial for themselves."* **Lib 1**

Such views are, according to Hannabuss & Allard (2001), ingrained into the profession.

Others differed slightly:

> *"Consideration for [cultural] sensitivities…
> is important, but tolerance is a two-way thing."* **Lib 2**

> *"It would depend on how offensive it was to [that] community."* **Lib 5**

> *"I am against censorship in general, although there
> are places I would draw the line, e.g. stocking
> virulently racist material.*

> *"…it could easily lead to the silencing of minority voices…For example,
> 'Babyji' is about an Indian teenage lesbian…I am sure that many
> people from the British-Indian community would find this offensive, but I would
> defend stocking it [because] there is not much
> fiction available about teenage Indian lesbians, and by removing it from the
> library I would be failing to reflect the experiences of Indian lesbians and silencing
> their voices."* **Lib 8**

The more conservative of the community respondents would certainly respond that, though none of them demanded for censorship and removal of books, they feel their voices have been silenced, too. This, though, is a fault of the publishers, not librarians.

In summary, many of the librarians surveyed have very positive ideals: they recognise the effective use of fiction as a tool for cultural awareness and they have some idea of their role in using works from that medium that portray those cultures

fairly. They do not, it would appear, have any practical guidelines in order to implement this, especially if they come across the situation where the community is offended. This lack of practical knowledge is reflected in their comments when asked about how they select the genre:

"[We choose] popular authors and bestsellers." **Lib 9**

"Known authors, know publishers…" **Lib 1**

"Interest to the library community [and] the British-Indian community. Media comments…" **Lib 4**

"The author's previous work; reviews…" **Lib 2**

"…if the author is known…positive reviews…offering something different on our shelves." **Lib 5**

"I am advised…by my readers, professional reviewers and my suppliers…" **Lib 6**

Only one librarian stated that they make sure the work is not controversial before they choose to select it. Unfortunately no further elaboration was given and the librarian did not wish to participate further than the questionnaire.

With no official policy in place for these other libraries, the librarians simply rely on the media, on reviews and on their supplier lists. What this means is that popular authors – such as Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali – are likely to be chosen as representative of this genre. Given the ire that the more popular authors received from the community respondents, it would appear the library is not the place to go in order to find alternative, more balanced, voices. Even if such voices were being published, the library would not even be choosing such fiction.

On the reliance on library supplier lists, **Lib 8** had this to add:

> *"The supplier lists are a problem because*
> *libraries can only choose from the selections*
> *the suppliers give.*

> *"But there's no reason why libraries*
> *can't take the responsibility themselves to be independent*
> *and find out about different fiction themselves…"*

One way they could do this is with consultation with the British-Indian community itself. Even a small group, such as the sample surveyed for this project, could give library stock managers a completely different insight. **Lib 8**, for example, stated that she would not buy books for the library that portrayed a crude caricature of the British-Indian community, as this would be an issue of quality. What will be discussed further on, however, is whether librarians are actually aware which novels would fall under this rubric.

The fact that the librarians did not know what to do with texts that touched on the sentiments of the community echoes what Roach & Morrison (1999) stated about how libraries did not know how to deal with the diverse needs of myriad ethnic groups. That this aspect is still present – if only in the context of sensitive texts – almost a decade later is troubling. The cultural change that they and other researchers such as Matthews & Roper (1994) envisioned does not appear to have been wholly effective.

With regards to the displaying of British-Indian English language fiction, most libraries stated that the genre was included within its general fiction section. One library mentioned that they have a separate section entitled 'South Asian Writers.' This library is located in an area with a high proportion of people with South-Asian ethnicity.

Nearly all the librarians stated that they have promoted the genre in the past. They used various methods to do so:

"Through a Black Ink promotion and display." **Lib 3**

"Two reading promotions on Asian fiction...

"One was entitled 'Made in Britain' by the Well Worth Reading scheme and the other was something like Black and Asian Writing by the same [scheme]." **Lib 2**

"We have promoted such fiction through posters." **Lib 7**

"...sometimes promoted as a genre itself, through displays." **Lib 10**

"...as part of Black History month." **Lib 4**

"...usually in conjunction with novels in an Indic language – in a promotional display case." **Lib 6**

Clearly there has been some effort in this regard, though it is incongruous to promote British-Indian books with Black fiction as they are different cultures with different experiences and needs; perhaps the only shared experience they have are that they are both immigrants, and this only for the first generation anyway. Unless they were clearly directed to do so, it would appear that the attitude here is that simply by being non-white qualifies a work to be included in a Black fiction promotion. This displays a somewhat lazy approach and reveals another attitude whereby some ethnic minorities are treated as one homogenous group – something blatantly contrary to ethnic diversity. **Lib 8** went one step further stating that libraries need to be doing more to promote fiction in general and their whole attitude towards promotion needs to improve.

Lib 12 had an apologetic approach:

"Black is…a clear badge that covers a multitude
and means a whole host of things…I don't think we
have a…catch-all term to describe Asian communities…

"...when I think 'Black'…I don't think non-English… when I think Asian I
do quickly (perhaps wrongly) make the leap to [other languages such as]
Urdu…so it could be that libraries are more comfortable
with the terminology [and] not that we do more for the [Black] community…"

Roach & Morrison (1999) had argued that the library needed a cultural change that moved away from the view that ethnic minority policies was solely about community language provision. Unfortunately, if the above is any indicator of general trends, it would appear that such a change has not yet occurred.

5.4.3 Perception of British-Indian fiction

Many of the librarians were well-read regarding the genre and had experienced a diverse range of authors. They also had equally diverse reasons for reading the genre, though many of the titles they chose were South-Asian authors writing about life outside Britain.

"'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai. Excellent novel giving a good
insight into the area, and its problems of racism." **Lib 1**

"'The Buddha of Suburbia' and 'An Unsuitable Boy.' Both very
rewarding reads." **Lib 2**

"[I have read] Vikram Seth…'Brick Lane'…Meera Syal.
I wouldn't necessarily read books like this to get an
understanding…Having said that, I do very much enjoy
reading any fiction which broadens my education, in which
I would include understanding different communities. I think what I

have gained…is the glimpse of family and social dynamics, which can surely only lead to a better understanding." **Lib 10.**

"I generally enjoy reading novels about people from backgrounds and cultures different from my own and I'd also say that by reading such novels, I have come to identify strongly with people from a whole range of backgrounds, as well as gaining greater understanding of different people's life experiences…" **Lib 8**

It would appear that there is some idea of learning about a new culture in reading the genre, thus reinforcing Cameron & Rutland's (2006) study into using fiction as a tool for extended contact and reducing prejudice. This, however, only works if the representation is a fair one. Since the librarians surveyed had an intuitive understanding of extended contact, this lends weight to the idea that the genre should show how the community is multifaceted so that readers are exposed to a balanced and fair portrayal. If they are not, their perceptions may be skewed.

Lib 12 was aware of this possibility:

"I must admit that what little I have read [in this genre] has tended to concentrate on issues of tension…perhaps it is a soft target to 'use'/portray the Asian community in this way…stereotypes and generalisations [are] easier, lazier and perhaps more popular…"

Some of the librarians' opinions of 'Brick Lane,' on the other hand, were a sharp contrast to what many from the British-Indian community respondents felt.

"…it gave a picture of life with features that we could identify with…[and] the cultural contrasts and expectations of behaviour and details of life in Bangladesh. I did not know much about either …but felt I understood the culture better after reading the book…" **Lib 5**

"...an enjoyable book that gave insight into the experiences of a woman newly arrived in London. The book provided insight into the community and culture of the woman. Being newly arrived…was an experience not all readers could relate to. However, her concerns/experiences were not unlike those of many other women." **Lib 4**

"[*'Brick Lane'] expressed well the isolation felt by people of Indian origin when they move to the UK."* **Lib 7**

Another librarian had the following to say about Meera Syal's 'Life is not all ha ha he he.'

"...I enjoyed [the book] a lot…it highlighted the tension between Western lifestyle and [a] traditional background." **Lib 5**

The 'clash of cultures' that some of the community respondents found so tiresome is here praised as a theme. The same respondents may also be troubled that 'Brick Lane' - which they described as pandering to stereotypes – was providing apparent insights into their culture and community to others (insights that Preston (2007) also believed he had gained). This again highlights the gulf between the librarians and the community respondents. Subjective opinions regarding the quality and entertainment value of the books in question are understandable, but the belief that some insight into the culture is taking place when people from that culture think otherwise is problematic.

Lib 8, on the other hand, disagreed:

"It depends on the individual. The reader can take what they want from the text."

She stated that simply reading about a community can open a reader up to new ideas. Even if the portrayal is unfair, a book may inspire the readers to engage with the community and find out the reality for themselves. She did concede that it could be problematic if the reader identifies with an imaginary community.

It should be noted that none of the librarians stated that they were repulsed by the portrayal of the culture and community in the novels that they read. Had they done so, it would not be likely that they would be motivated to engage further with similar people.

Nonetheless, it would appear that the librarians in the sample were unaware of what the community felt about the portrayal of their communities. When asked whether they knew of any controversy regarding the genre and how that affected their stock selection and promotion, one librarian stated:

> *"'The Satanic Verses' by Salman Rushdie…there was*
> *much debate about whether libraries should stock [it]. In*
> *the authority I worked in at the time we maintained the view…*
> *that it should be stocked unless made illegal under the rule of censorship*
> *or court case."* **Lib 2**

This seems like a missed opportunity. Though 'The Satanic Verses' affair pre-dates the 'Libraries for All' initiative, there could have been a very good role for libraries throughout the whole controversy. The library could have been used as an open forum – or, if there was a fear matters would get out of hand, with invited speakers – where the Muslim community could have spoken about why they found the book so offensive, and where the host community could have stated their piece so perhaps some sort of understanding could have been reached for the locality in its entirety. Even if it was then decided that the book would remain on the shelves, such an initiative would have allowed everyone to have a voice and thus would have been a practical manifestation of social inclusion.

Another librarian said:

> *"I was aware of the controversy [surrounding*
> *'Brick Lane'] but it did not prevent me from*
> *selecting or promoting the reading of this novel both*
> *in English and Bengali as I considered it a very*

valuable addition to stock – and yes I have read it myself." **Lib 6**

Given the perception of British-Indian fiction already shown by librarians above, 'reading it oneself' is perhaps not an adequate enough gauge by which a librarian – now completely in the age of 'Libraries for All' – can judge the value of the work. This is not to say that the book should not be stocked and promoted, but that consultation with the community may have given the librarian a better understanding of the reasons why there was a controversy. Given, too, that the question had not asked whether the librarian had read the work in question, the above response betrays a very defensive attitude on her behalf.

What is troublesome in this last example is that there are elements of both cultural imperialism and misrecognition at work. Without consulting with the community the librarian has used her own judgement to decide what is the best course of action, rendering the sentiments of the community – intentionally or unintentionally – as irrelevant and therefore inferior. She also knows that there is controversy regarding the work – and thus the misrecognition concept of having a demeaning image imposed on another culture – but is willing to perpetuate such a controversy. Both attitudes are against the ethos of a library profession with social inclusion at its heart.

If this small sample is truly representative of the profession as a whole then clearly librarians are unaware of the opinions and feelings of many of those in the British-Indian community. This is problematic: do librarians have the necessary tools to be able to select and promote this genre? When they do promote the fiction, there may be a danger of promoting something that may inadvertently cause offence. Negative feelings, once aroused, can sour people from using the service as a whole.

Another issue here is that suggestions for staff training in order to acquire the tools necessary to meet diverse ethnic needs had already been put forward in the past as mentioned by Roach & Morrison (1999) and Matthews & Roper (1994) and if very little progress has been made since, then that is a cause for alarm.

Once again, engagement with the community – yet another suggestion mentioned in the past (Elliott, 1999) - could overcome some of these issues. Relying on the community rather than the media can give librarians some forewarning regarding what works may cause disruption in their respective local areas. This, in turn, will help promote good relations with the community, as they will feel that they are being listened to and this may help to reduce the disillusionment some of them – particularly amongst the Muslim community – feel; again, this would be social inclusion in practise, encompassing the idea of the library as a neutral meeting place as envisioned in the 'Libraries for All' initiative (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999) and the image of the library where ideas and individuals can meet under the steerage of the wider community (Library and Information Commission, 2000). What actual action that takes place with regards to such works is a matter for the three groups - librarians, the British-Indian community and the wider English community – to decide in each locality, on condition that all three have been allowed to express their views on the matter.

Lib 8 agreed:

"We should be talking to the community, asking them what they want. We should find out why non-users aren't using the library.

However she also noted:

"Ethnic minority fiction provision still tends to be more about fiction in [the respective community's] native language than about English language books."

Again proving that little has changed since Roach & Morrison (1999) urged libraries to move away from such an attitude.

When asked on the questionnaire whether they agree that libraries do enough to promote the genre, 4 librarians stated 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree', one stated 'strongly agree' but with no further elaboration and 6 noted that they 'neither agree nor disagree.' The comments reflected this uncertainty:

"I don't know enough about this to give
an informed opinion." **Lib 10**

"I have not sufficient knowledge of what all
libraries provide." **Lib 6**

"I don't think there is much promotion…it could
certainly be improved. **Lib 4**

Other librarians mentioned that they only promote it if there is a large British-Indian population in their area:

"We concentrate more on ethnic groupings which
have a larger presence and where there appears to
be more need." **Lib 5**

"…I hardly ever see a white person looking
at the black section in my library. This can lead to libraries
in predominantly white areas not stocking black
or Asian fiction at all…I think [such an attitude] is
very damaging as well as clearly being rubbish!" **Lib 8**

Whilst it is understandable that a local library will tailor its services to the needs of its local community, it could be argued – especially with the library's potential role in social inclusion – that there is an opportunity to provide the local host community an insight into the myriad other peoples that now live in the UK. It is no longer atypical for a person to spend their entire existence in one particular locality and so the library can help introduce other communities that people may now meet simply by travelling throughout the UK.

Given that many of the librarians surveyed recognised the role of using fiction to help understand about other communities, it would seem once again that library practise does not meet up with individual librarians' ideals; even if they did, the question again comes back to whether the fiction that they promote actually does give a fair understanding about other communities. What now needs to be discussed is how this can be overcome.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Objective 1:

To discover whether people from the British Indian community… feel fiction about their community reflects fairly their culture and experiences.

Conclusion:

From the small group surveyed it would appear that many of the British-Indian community do not feel that they are fairly represented in fiction that is written about their culture. Common complaints were that the genre tended to cover irrelevant and now clichéd issues such as unhappy arranged marriages, culture clashes and identity issues. The respondents felt that many of these issues no longer applied to them and were unhappy at how these issues were resolved; for example, a character in a 'culture clash' storyline implicitly or explicitly choosing Western culture over their native ethnic culture.

Many of the respondents also felt the portrayal of their culture and community was not balanced. They were well aware that there are problems within their communities, but wished that the more positive aspects were shown as well as the negative. They were not asking for an idealised representation. Other, more mainstream issues such as nationalism, teenage pregnancy and disillusionment were felt to be better representative of current thought within the community.

A lot of the Muslim respondents disliked the liberal aspect that typifies many of the more popular novels in the genre. They felt that their community was a conservative one and that they did not have such a voice represented in a positive manner in fiction. This was not a monolithic view, however, as one non-Muslim respondent found nothing wrong with a liberal slant and was able to detach from the story and enjoy it for what it was.

The respondents had mixed views as to why such a genre used what they felt were unfair portrayals. Many respondents believed it was nothing more than to add drama to a work of fiction, while others felt it was to appeal to a Western audience. Some felt that there was a deliberate attempt to either ingratiate the author with the dominant culture or an outright attack on the ethnic culture.

Objective 2:

To discover whether or not library professionals consider a fair representation as a factor when they choose to stock and promote such fiction.

and

Objective 3:

To discover whether libraries should play a role in positive portrayals of the British-Indian community.

Conclusions:

It was discovered that librarians do consider fiction a good tool in creating empathy and building bridges between communities. They also saw themselves in a position to be able to facilitate such community cohesion. They did not, however, have any official guidelines on how they could transplant this ideal into the process of stock selection and promotion, nor did they have any guidelines on what they should do when they came across works that the British-Indian community either felt were unrepresentative or offensive. In many of these latter cases, the whole issue was left to the individual librarian's discretion.

Many of the librarians were also unaware of how the British-Indian community viewed the content of many of the genre novels that they had personally read. They cited examples and themes that they personally felt gave a beneficial and insightful look into a new culture, but which respondents from that culture had singled out as being grossly stereotypical, unrepresentative and unfair. This highlighted a gulf in

understanding between the two groups. With regards to the issue of offensive or unfair works, many librarians were reluctant to engage in any form of censorship, but did not offer any other practical alternatives save to stock the book and let the borrowers decide whether they wished to read it or not. It would appear that the culture of the library with regards to this minority community has not changed as much as it should have given that previous research from the early 1990s had identified that a cultural change - with regards to the needs of minorities in general - was needed. (Matthews & Roper, 1994).

Much of the genre stock selected is reliant on media reviews and library supplier lists which seemed to focus on the more popular, mainstream authors. There was little or no consultation with the British-Indian community and there was no attempt to find out about lesser-known works that may have more fair representations of the community. A lot of librarians did admit that there was room for improvement in their dealings with the British-Indian community and fiction related to that community.

6.1 Recommendations

6.1.1 General

Further research

The following recommendations derived from this project will be based solely on the data received from the two groups surveyed. However, since both samples were so small, before any practical consideration can be given to the following suggestions, the conclusions detailed above must be tested by a larger study utilising a larger sample in both groups.

There are areas within this study that could benefit with further research. A more representative sample of the British-Indian community – including more non-Muslims and people who may feel that they did identify with the clash of cultures theme – may yield different conclusions.

Discovering attitudes amongst library staff towards ethnic minority policies would be a worthwhile venture. Is there evidence of cultural imperialism in staff attitudes, for example? Cultural imperialism in this context would be a person who treats the whole area from a conscious or unconscious superior vantage point. This could manifest itself in a condescending attitude towards ethnic minority patrons, staff and policies, in an attitude where ethnic minorities are treated as one homogenous group or in an attitude where, superficially, everything is being done to cater to minority needs, but without any comprehension or appreciation of the culture and people they are dealing with.

6.1.2 Librarians

Best Practice & Active Participation

Just as there are many from the British-Indian community who feel that fiction does not represent them fairly, there may be librarians who read this report and feel that this study, too, does not represent them fairly. They may have been involved in work that did have positive benefits for both the British-Indian community and libraries. They may, too, have dealt with the issues raised in this study in a fair and productive manner. Such librarians should be encouraged to share best practice with others in their profession. One way to do this would be to participate in research such as this one so that their views are well represented.

Awareness of the Genre

Librarians need to be aware of what is available in this genre. They need to be well-read, independent of media reviews and library supplier lists, and need to be able to identify authors who may offer alternative views regarding the community. As well as promoting the more well-known authors and works, librarians should be stocking and promoting lesser known authors who may give a more fair representation of the community. If such a latter theme is present, librarians should promote the work based on that very theme. This will then highlight works through which members of the other communities can then gain meaningful insights into the British-Indian community.

Such a policy should not be restricted to solely the British-Indian community, but extended, too, to other ethnic communities as well. To do so will give the library a unique role as an alternative and well-trusted resource to media reviews that may do nothing more than reinforce the promotion of the same, clichéd works. If librarians are unable to do the research necessary to identify such alternative works, they should consult with the respective communities and members of staff from those communities, and find out from them.

Whilst this is somewhat similar to the Black and Minority Stock Group (BSG) that Hackney libraries utilised (Durrani et al, 1999), the difference here is that the above should not *solely* be the domain of South-Asian (or the equivalent from other communities) members of the staff – though their input is necessary - but should include other staff not from that community as well. This will broaden the experience of all staff and avoid marginalisation.

The Role of the Librarian

Librarians themselves should see bridge-building, empathy and positive promotion as one of the essential duties of their job. Such an undertaking could be achieved by including such qualities as an essential skill in the person specification in the recruitment process, identifying such skills in the interviewing of candidates and building upon such skills in further training, for example through the use of quality diversity training. Recruiting empathic people would be far better than trying to inculcate it, especially as there are people in the profession who do not see it and anything related to it – such as bridge-building and positive promotion – as part of their role (Birdi & Wilson, 2008).

Similar recommendations have been made in the past, especially with regards to job descriptions (Matthews & Roper, 1994), though that was in context of a specially designed 'Ethnic Minority' or 'Community' Librarians. The present researcher feels that all librarians should have some of these skills, regardless of ethnic background, as this is more 'inclusive' than segregating librarians on ethnic lines and roles. This will also help librarians move beyond a simplistic method of

merely listening to minority groups and providing them with that they want, to actually understanding why different groups have such needs. This may create empathy within existing librarians and create a deeper understanding and appreciation of a different culture.

The 'quality diversity training' mentioned above would here mean that librarians go beyond seeing ethnic fiction as solely the domain of ethnic language works, but that they, too, are made aware of the genre in English, what the community feels about such a genre, and are made aware of current issues being discussed within the community.

It may be that only a proportion of librarians would be able to go so far – as it may create role strain (Birdi & Wilson, 2008) - and even then would only be able to work with one or two communities so as not to be overwhelmed. Even in such cases, the opportunity to engage with other communities should be made available to all librarians and not merely the member of staff that shares the same ethnicity with that particular community.

Ethnic librarians catering to their own ethnic community is understandable as they may have a more natural empathy with that community and can overcome potential language barriers; however, they should work in tandem with librarians from outside of that community, so that those librarians can gain more insights into a different culture and can develop new skills that they can use in different situations. Those particular ethnic librarians should also be allowed to engage with another community in addition to their own so that they, too, acquire those skills. The principle behind this is a celebration of ethnic diversity. Minorities should not be treated as a homogenous group. The needs and views of the British-Indian community may not necessarily be the same as those of other ethnic minorities.

The present researcher is aware that there are policies currently being implemented such as the CILIP Positive Action Trainee Scheme, designed to encourage people from minority ethnic communities to enter the profession, and of previous policies such as the Quality Leaders Project, designed to give Black library professionals a voice through which to steer and develop the library service for their

community. The above recommendations may be useful in the further and future development of such initiatives, not only for people from ethnic minorities but for people from the host community as well.

Librarians, too, should be pro-active in promoting all aspects of their service to every part of the community, regardless of ethnic background. Provisions such as the inter-library loan, the ability to order brand new books and other facilities should be made explicitly aware to users and non-users. The community as a whole may then appreciate more the value of the library and everything that it provides.

Engagement and Social Inclusion

Librarians need to be aware of what the British-Indian community considers offensive and then use such publicity as an opportunity to host events or seminars where the community is given a voice and can explain why they think something upsets them. The host community can also express their views and together all three groups – the British-Indian community, the host community and the librarians – can decide on what to do with a particular piece of work in their particular area.

The benefit to this approach is three-fold:

- The library as a venue is shown to have a unique and neutral part to play in mainstream affairs independent from potential bias and sensationalism from the media, thus sharing ideas steered by the local community (Library and Information Commission, 2000). Using the library should be cost-effective and, should there be a fear that events will be too heated, the use of guest speakers could be utilised.

- If not agreement, such an endeavour will, at the very least, foster some sort of understanding of the views held by all three groups – whether it is to do with offensiveness, freedom of speech, censorship or any other issue that may arise.

- Even if it is decided that the work will still be stocked in the library, the British-Indian community will have felt that their voice was heard, something that some parts of the community do not feel is true with the media. This will make them feel included in the wider affairs of the greater community and thus this will be a very practical application of social inclusion.

A Final Note for Librarians

Elliott (1999) noted that the same recommendations for ethnic minority policies – such as the retraining of staff and consultation between libraries and minority groups – were being made in both the 1970s and 1990s. The present researcher also feels that his recommendations, with minor variations, are similar to those that preceded him.

Given the current state of affairs in Britain in 2008 where some minorities feel that they have no voice, feel targeted by the media, and where extreme voices from many quarters of society *are* given a voice, the uniqueness of the library as a neutral and middle path is all the more apparent. The positive effects that libraries could have – not only for themselves, but also for a pluralistic society in general – should be enough motivation for the professionals to implement conscientiously what various studies have suggested. It would appear that libraries are aware of what needs to be done. They simply have to practise it. If the organisational culture truly has changed little from the 1970s, then how do libraries expect to attract people from minority communities to join and enhance their profession?

6.1.3 The British-Indian Community

The community themselves can help in this issue by being pro-active in identifying and promoting works that they feel is a fair representation of themselves. If such works exist they should ask the library to order such books and stock them. If such works do not exist, they should try and lobby publishers to produce novels that they will be happy with.

Publishers, in turn, should be willing to accommodate alternative voices in the genre, even if on small print runs. Such an undertaking depends entirely on whether publishers feel such works will be viable and cost-effective. If, as surmised, the current authors in the genre, regardless of their ethnic background, identify themselves as wholly Western, this would explain why there are apparent elements of cultural imperialism in their works and why characters in their novels appear to side with the dominant culture rather than the native one. Publishers may find it beneficial to give voices to authors who personally take the opposing view, or authors who were able to successfully synthesise between the two cultures.

The British-Indian community, in turn, can also use fiction to dispel stereotypes they may hold about other cultures and can use fiction to create empathy for those cultures. They can read works that other cultures feel are a fair representation of themselves whilst the British-Indian community can recommend – or produce -similar works about their own community. Doing so will create a two-way process of equal recognition that may then play a small part in fostering healthy and positive community relations all round.

Word count: 19,994

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8. Appendix

8.1 Community Questionnaire

MA Librarianship
University of Sheffield
Research Project Questionnaire

Name:
E-mail address:
Town/City:

The above information is for communication purposes only and will not appear in the dissertation. All results will be anonymous and findings will be identified by code (i.e "Person A from a locality with a high density of ethnic minorities said…").

Please answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1) When reading fiction, do you prefer to more:

☐ Borrow books from the library?
☐ Purchase books yourself?
☐ Have no preference

2) What type of fiction do you usually like to read and why?

3) Have you ever read fiction written by and about the British-Indian community?

Please list titles and authors.

The British-Indian community is defined here as the community in the UK that is ethnically derived from the Indian sub-continent: Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

British-Indian fiction is here defined **only** as English language fiction written by and about people from the community.

If **NO,** please go to **question 8.**

4) Which works would you recommend to others as a good example of British-Indian fiction and why?

5) Which works would you recommend to avoid, being bad examples of British-Indian fiction and why?

6) Please **describe** anything in those novels that you think gave a **positive** representation of your community or the issues you face as an individual of that community.

This could be something you thought was true-to-life, accurate, uplifting or **anything** that resonated with you in a positive way in any manner.

Why do you think the author included the scenes you mentioned?

Please mention the title and author of the novels you are referring to.

7) Please **describe** anything in those novels that you think gave a **negative** representation of your community or the issues you face as an individual of that community.

This could be something you thought was inaccurate, offensive or **anything** that resonated with you in a negative way in any manner.

Please mention the title and author of the novels you are referring to.

Why do you think the author included the scenes you mentioned?

Please go to **question 9**.

8) If you do not read British-Indian fiction**,** is there any particular reason why this genre does not appeal to you?

9) How would you rate your local library with regards to **providing** British-Indian fiction?

☐ Poor
☐ Fair
☐ Average
☐ Good
☐ Excellent

10) Do you think your local library **displays** and **promotes** this type of fiction in an adequate manner? Please give details including **how** they do so (or not) and **why** you think they do so (or not)?

It may be necessary for this survey to be followed up with further questions via e-mail. It may also be necessary for a sample of respondents to be contacted for an interview. The interview is entirely optional and if you are happy for me to contact you for this purpose, then please record your contact details below:

Contact information:
Preferred method of interview (e-mail, face-to-face, telephone):

Thank you for your time and for taking part in this questionnaire.

8.2 Librarian Questionnaire

MA Librarianship
University of Sheffield
Research Project Questionnaire

Name:
E-mail address:
Name of library/library authority:

The above information is for communication purposes only and will not appear in the dissertation. All results will be anonymous and findings will be identified by code (i.e "Person A from a locality with a high density of ethnic minorities said…").

This questionnaire is about library policy towards English language fiction aimed at the British-Indian community. Though many of these questions could be applied to ethnic minorities in general, the focus of this research will be the aforementioned community. The British-Indian community is defined here as the community in the UK that is ethnically derived from the Indian sub-continent: Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. British-Indian fiction for the purpose of this project refers **only** to English language fiction written by and for people of the aforementioned community.

Questions 1-5

Please answer the following in the spaces provided giving as much detail as possible.

1) What factors do you consider when selecting English language fiction written by and about the British-Indian community?

2) Have you ever been aware of any controversy (either local or nationwide) surrounding any of the British-Indian fiction you have chosen?

If **YES: a)** What was your reaction to this controversy and to what extent did it affect your selection and/or promotion of the work in question?

3) Have you ever read any English language British-Indian fiction?

If **YES**: **a)** What was your opinion of the work and what kind of understanding did you gain about the communities and people it portrayed?

Please mention the title and author of the novels you are referring to.

If **NO: b)** Is there any particular reason why this type of fiction does not appeal to you?

4) How is English language British-Indian fiction displayed in your library?

5) Have you ever promoted such fiction and how?

Questions 6-10

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

6) *Fiction is a good medium through which awareness can be raised about different cultures and communities.*

☐ **Strongly disagree**
☐ **Disagree**
☐ **Neither agree nor disagree**
☐ **Agree**
☐ **Strongly agree**

Please detail why you chose your particular answer.

7) *Fiction about ethnic minorities can build bridges between the host community and those communities which can then contribute to the multicultural nature of modern day Britain.*

☐ **Strongly disagree**
☐ **Disagree**
☐ **Neither agree nor disagree**
☐ **Agree**
☐ **Strongly agree**

Please detail why you chose your particular answer.

8) *Libraries have a responsibility in choosing English language fiction for the British Indian community that accurately portrays the lives and experiences of members of that community in a positive manner.*

☐ **Strongly disagree**
☐ **Disagree**
☐ **Neither agree nor disagree**
☐ **Agree**
☐ **Strongly agree**

Please detail why you chose your particular answer.

9) *Libraries should not stock fiction about a community that that particular community finds offensive or controversial.*

☐ **Strongly disagree**
☐ **Disagree**
☐ **Neither agree nor disagree**
☐ **Agree**
☐ **Strongly agree**

Please detail why you chose your particular answer.

10) *Libraries are doing more than enough to provide and promote British-Indian fiction both to the British-Indian community and to other communities in Britain.*

☐ **Strongly disagree**
☐ **Disagree**

☐ **Neither agree nor disagree**
☐ **Agree**
☐ **Strongly agree**

Please detail why you chose your particular answer.

It may be necessary for this survey to be followed up with further questions via e-mail. It may also be necessary for a sample of respondents to be contacted for an interview. The interview is entirely optional and if you are happy for me to contact you for this purpose, then please record your contact details below:

Contact information:
Preferred method of interview (e-mail, face-to-face, telephone):

Thank you for your time and for taking part in this questionnaire.